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SOCIAL MEDIA & THE ARTS

How three organizations navigate the virtual community

By Kristi Niemeyer

Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr and Instagram: Social media, in all its dazzling and bewildering complexity, dominates the digital landscape.

To get a handle on how arts organizations in Montana are using these platforms to keep patrons engaged and reach new audiences, we talked to representatives of three of the state's innovators: Jodi Grant, director of marketing and corporate relations at the Alberta Bair Theater in Billings; Luke Walrath, co-founder of Alpine Theatre Project in Whitefish; and Rachel Hicks, director of programs and communications at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena.

Here are excerpts from our Q&A. For an interactive conversation, tune in to the webinar, 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 20 (see details on page 1).

Alberta Bair Theater

The Alberta Bair posted some remarkable results from electronic networking last year, and attributes a 14.4% increase in ticket sales overall and an 87% increase in online ticket sales to more efficient use of its website, Facebook, Twitter and email blasts.

The past two years have yielded a ten-fold increase in people purchasing tickets from the states of Idaho, Washington and Colorado. For the a Kris Kristoferson performance last fall, a woman flew from Seattle to Billings with her sister and mother, a life-long fan of the country star. The ABT attributes these sales to the ABT's enhanced website and customers' ability to buy tickets real time on the internet.

Thanks to a technology upgrade, residents in the region now have access to live performing arts information, including upcoming performances, arts education, outreach, donor information, and links to artists and art educators throughout the world.

Jody Grant was hired last September and has since worked to increase the Alberta Bair's presence and consistency with social media, which she describes as "a vehicle for communication and engagement." She notes that the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and LinkedIn comprise "one tool in a toolbox that also includes email blasts, the website and traditional media."

KN: Which sites are most useful to you and why?

JG: Facebook. It's the most commonly used site of our patrons so it has the widest reach. It's a productive use of my time for mass communication to our patrons, artists and beyond.

And Twitter: What it lacks in numbers in our market, it makes up for in engagement, since Twitter users tend to be more engaged. The Oak Ridge Boys and Straight No Chaser are two groups with whom I was able to piggyback their posts and reach their fan bases.

KN: What are some of the challenges you've faced in creating a robust social media presence?

JG: Time: I target my messages for each platform rather than use a site like Hubspot to shotgun one message. The audiences of each site have different expectations of interaction.

Technology: I also personally bought a new camera, a Canon D70, that allows me to download its pictures to my iPhone and then I directly upload to social media during the event, prior to intermission, to engage people and artists in "real time."

I have yet to figure out how to get an audience on Instagram. Most of our

Alberta Bair Theater: Does a post support the ABT mission: bringing the excitement of the performing arts to Big Sky Country? Does it inform about an artist? Does it support partners in our community? Does it make me smile?

shows don't allow photographs or videos during a performance. I need to engage the selfie phenomena and have those posted/tagged.

KN: I notice ABT recently received a Constant Contact All Star Award for reaching customers and engaging with them. Please tell us how you use Constant Contact to stay in touch with patrons.

JG: Since I began here, I began a consistent outreach each month (two weeks prior to the beginning of the next month), based on responses I got from people who took the time to open them. After each monthly send,

I weed out bounced emails and keep our list clean. I reply the same day to anyone who replies to an email.

I use Photoshop to create a very graphic message with very little text. About once a month I send to specific lists based on upcoming events (i.e. Broadway, country, etc.), and I have made a very easy link on the ABT website to allow visitors to sign up for our emails.

I don't over-send emails; one or two a month is plenty, unless we're communicating a cancellation or vital piece of information (i.e. when Kenny Rogers rescheduled, that announcement was its own email).

KN: Your Facebook page has nearly 3,000 Likes. How often do you post?

JG: At least two or three times a week, if not more often.

It depends on what the Facebook climate is like – what there is to share among people we follow, what's newsworthy and how many upcoming shows we have.

KN: how much time does the ABT invest in social media?

JG: At least an hour a day on average, broken into much smaller chunks of time throughout the day. I spend at least five minutes combined for all platforms every hour or so throughout the day to check for breaking news and items of interest. Email updates let me know about certain traffic. And I spend about 10 minutes at each event to upload photos.

Alpine Theatre Project: How interesting would it be if what you were watching on stage was only one part of the story? That other parts were being played out online? It's a whole new medium.



The Alberta Bair's Facebook page: Site most commonly used by patrons of all ages.

KN: What guides your decisions about what to post?

JG: Does a post support the ABT mission: bringing the excitement of the performing arts to Big Sky Country? Does it inform about an artist who was, or will be at our venue? Is it positive? Does it add value to discussions regarding performing arts entertainment, funding, the climate of our industry? Does it support partners in our community? Does it make me smile?

Alpine Theatre Project, Whitefish

The Whitefish-based theatre company has seen significant success in using social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and YouTube to engage its constituents on a more immediate level. Its accomplishments are lauded in both artistic and tourism-based circles.

Luke Walrath, co-founder and director of marketing and development, is a self-described geek, who believes social media offers performing arts companies "so many more tools for storytelling. We'd be foolish to ignore that."

KN: First of all, how do you keep up?

LW: I'm on these sites constantly, reading different posts from other artists, arts companies, critics, and news outlets ...

I use two main apps for this besides actually going on Facebook, Twitter and G+.

(1) Feedly. It's a news aggregator that pulls articles of interest to me ... and gives me stuff that might be worth passing on to our followers. It also keeps me up to date on latest trends and new arts stuff.

(2) Buffer. This program allows me to post to different social media accounts simultaneously and also schedule the posts. I've found it to be better for us than other programs like Hootsuite. And it's free. Woo hoo!

KN: Which sites are most useful to you and why?

LW: I think Google+ is actually the best platform, but it doesn't have the critical mass that both FB and Twitter have.

They're all useful in different ways. We look to FB if we want people to comment or interact. Twitter is clean for just getting content out there. G+ is an interesting mix of both, and helps improve our search-result ranking within Google, though we get almost no interaction on it.

Pinterest is not something we use other than for collaboration with designers. Instagram is better for sharing photo content since it encourages sharing within its own network and across FB and Twitter.

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Researcher: "Facebook is an anomaly"

In an interview titled "The era of Facebook is an anomaly," posted March 13 at www.theverge.com, researcher danah boyd discusses teens, identity, and the future of digital communication. Her new book, *It's Complicated*, is the sum of a decade of research and over 150 interviews with teens.

Boyd "is one of the world's sharpest authorities on how teens interact with technology, and for many, her word has become canon for understanding why teens do what they do," writes reporter Ellis Hamburger.

"Boyd's day job is at Microsoft Research, where she helps make sure Microsoft doesn't miss the beat on privacy and social media trends. She argues that many of the challenges Microsoft faces aren't about technology, but are instead about understanding the social dynamics of how people interact today versus when Microsoft was founded.

"Because to boyd, social media isn't new. It's just the latest scapegoat for America's obsession with overprotection."

Read the interview at theverge.com.